



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

31 October 1984

PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR USSR OF GANDHI ASSASSINATION

The assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has cost the USSR one of its most important allies in the Third World and may—over the long term—make India a less forceful advocate for Soviet positions in Nonaligned and Third World forums. Nonetheless, over the short term the USSR is likely to maintain its position as the predominant outside influence in New Delhi. The two countries share common security concerns about China, the US, and Pakistan as well as common fears about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. In view of the significant military and economic ties between Moscow and New Delhi, the Soviets will be well placed to manipulate India's heightened security concerns in the aftermath of the assassination and to establish good working relations with Indira's successor, her son Rajiv. Nonetheless, the Soviets' ability to manipulate Indian internal affairs is limited. [redacted]

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Although the Soviets have worked painstakingly to institutionalize the relationship, Gandhi's role in forging the present close relationship has been pivotal. No other leading Indian politician is as well disposed toward the

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Third World Activities Division, Office of Soviet Analysis. It has been coordinated with the Office of Near East and South Asia Analysis. Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities, SOVA on [redacted]

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USSR as she was. Gandhi traded on the relationship to extract benefits from the USSR--notably licensed production rights for advanced Soviet military equipment--that have been provided to no other Soviet Third World client. []

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The Soviets did not take seriously Gandhi's effort to promote her younger son Sanjay as her successor but did not make the same mistake when Rajiv became the heir apparent after Sanjay's death in 1981. In 1983, he was invited to Moscow for a two week visit and given treatment normally reserved for chiefs of state. He had meetings with all the senior leadership (including Defense Minister Ustinov and all the service chiefs) except General Secretary Andropov. In his public pronouncements after the visit, he echoed his mother's anti-Western biases, particularly her charges of Western and Pakistani involvement in Indian internal affairs. []

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The Soviets clearly anticipated that Rajiv would succeed his mother; the first Soviet condolence message to the Indians was sent by General Secretary Chernenko to Rajiv Gandhi in his capacity as General Secretary of the Congress Party, not to Zail Singh, the constitutional head of state. In view of their misgivings about the possible influence of Rajiv's Italian wife and his sympathies toward the West prior to his entry into politics, the Soviets will presumably spare no effort to ingratiate themselves with Rajiv in order to advance Soviet interests. []

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None of India's other non-Communist political parties have had the same commitment to close Indo-Soviet ties over the years as the Congress Party and no other Indian politician in the Congress Party has as good a chance as Rajiv to ensure continued Congress domination of Indian politics. Memories of the 1977-79 Janata coalition, when Indian foreign policy was more even-handed toward the US and the USSR and there was talk of abrogating the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty are still fresh in Moscow and probably an important factor in Soviet calculations. []

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Continued differences with Pakistan will ensure that India requires strong links to the USSR in any event. Moreover, the Soviets probably will do what they can in the coming weeks and months to strengthen Rajiv's internal political position and to try to ensure that his commitment to the Indo-Soviet relationship becomes as firm as his mother's. The Soviet delegation that attends the funeral will undoubtedly be at a high level and will take steps to show Moscow's approval of the succession. Part of the effort will involve attempting to fan Indian suspicions of the US and Pakistan; Soviet propaganda

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organs already are charging that Gandhi's assassins got their ideological inspiration from CIA. The new Indian Defense Minister was in Moscow at the time of the assassination for talks on further defense cooperation between India and the USSR. The Soviets will use that relationship to try to buttress ties with the Indians and underscore the USSR's key role as India's major arms supplier. Economic aid and trade relationships will also be manipulated to underscore Moscow's commitment to India's economic development under Rajiv.

Whether this succeeds depends primarily on Rajiv's leadership abilities. If Rajiv can keep the lid on internal retribution against the Sikhs and use his mother's assassination to strengthen the Congress Party or if the opposition fragments in the absence of Indira as a unifying force, the Soviets could emerge with their influence enhanced and the relationship on a more secure footing.

If, on the other hand, Rajiv--as many Indian experts believe--proves to be a weak and ineffective leader, and an opposition coalition manages to defeat Congress, the Soviets could be dealing with a much different Indian leadership six months from now than they have been accustomed to over the past four years. Such a leadership probably would not move quickly to dismantle the important bilateral economic and military relationships--which would remain important to any Indian leadership--but it could distance itself from the Soviets on such international issues as Afghanistan, the Indian Ocean, Kampuchea, and India's relations with its neighbors. Opposition politicians, for example, have criticized Gandhi for her support of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and her hegemonistic attitude toward dealing with India's neighbors.

Implications for the US

Overt and covert Soviet efforts to implicate the US and Pakistan will have credibility in some circles in India. The Pakistanis fear--probably on good grounds--a sharp deterioration in their bilateral relations as India seeks scapegoats for Gandhi's assassination. Any worsening of relations with India will bring General Zia to the United States for additional military assistance. The Soviets, on the other hand, probably fear that Washington will signal support to the new government in India and, in doing so, will try to loosen Indo-Soviet ties. The Soviets will presumably try to manipulate Indian internal affairs to prevent any improved role for Washington.